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Gregg Allman

Concert-goers can catch folk
buskers, a Southern rocker or
the Binghamton Philharmonic.

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Jose-Luis Novo

The Crooners

DAILY
CALENDARS

ON
STAGE

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TICKETS



Members of the band The Crooners are, from left: Kevin Denton, Nyles Fitzgerald and Chris Merkley.

Crooners deserve radio, not street corner, play

By Chris Kocher

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Press & Sun-Bulletin

Music

- ▶ Who: The Crooners
- ▶ When/Where: 10 p.m.

today at Castaways,
413 Taughannock Blvd., Ithaca
(\$5 cover over 21; \$7 under 21);
10 p.m. Friday at Lucky's,
77 Main St., Cortland (\$5 cover).

▶ More information:
www.thecrooners.com;
www.cdbaby.com/crooners

Life on the road always has been a make-or-break proposition for musicians, probably as far back as when cavemen formed the first primitive rock bands.

But if you really want to test band members' mettle, put them in the middle of a foreign continent for weeks or months at a time and make them sing on street corners, without exactly knowing where their next meal will come from.

Such is the lot of folk/rock trio The Crooners — one that they have chosen for themselves during four summer busking tours around Europe since the band formed in 2002.

"We've really thrown ourselves together in close quarters at times — tiny Parisian hotel rooms and crowded, sticky subways with more equipment than we should have been lugging around," said Crooners guitarist and Binghamton resident Chris Merkley. "This band has definitely taught patience and tolerance, trying to work together."

After meeting at Cornell University and playing in various groups (together and separately) around the Ithaca scene, Merkley (who also plays a mean harmonica), Kevin Denton (guitar and electric bass) and Nyles

Fitzgerald (washtub bass, drums and percussion) found inspiration from Fitzgerald's great-uncle, the "grand-daddy of the buskers" in Paris. They decided to check out the scene for themselves, and The Crooners were born.

With "Uncle Danny" as their guide, the trio learned the art of "the pitch" — scoping out the best spots, drawing in passers-by, maybe getting them to buy a few CDs before moving on to another area. Legal? Not exactly, but police enforcement varies depending on the mood of the current government. Some see street performers as a cultural happening; others see them as a nuisance. Either way, band members admit the lifestyle is an addictive one.

While busking, The Crooners' music utilizes whatever the band members can carry comfortably: acoustic instruments and a

small battery-powered amplifier so they can be heard over the crowds. The result is a high-energy, all-or-nothing intersection of country rhythms, blues, folk and swing — even some early rock 'n' roll.

"This band is maybe the most adrenaline-junkie band I've ever been a part of," Merkley said. "Sometimes we joke about it — if we're not careful, we'll start speeding up with everyone playing as fast and as hard as we can, and we're going to explode."

The Crooners' new self-released album, "So Many Places," channels that energy in the studio for 11 strong original tracks that blend the trio's street smarts with the plugged-in capabilities of having a handy electric outlet. Oddly (but delightfully), the result sounds like a mid-1960s British Invasion band that's moved beyond skiffle-guitars and been switched on to the full spectrum of American roots music.

Some Crooners songs seem to have direct ancestors: The Rolling Stones (the love-gone-sour punch-up "Terms of Endearment"; the murder ballad "Lady Lazarus"), The Beatles (the White Album-ish "Signifying Monkey") and The Kinks (the harmonica-driven urgency of "On My Way"; the bouncy "Village Green Preservation Society"-era horns and harmonies of "Don't Walk Out On Me").

CROONERS

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Or are Merkle and Fitzgerald (who swap song-writing duties on “So Many Places”) simply tapping into the same vibe as those Brit-rock pioneers when they melded Chicago blues and traditional folk with Buddy Holly rock?

Merkley thinks a collective unconscious and the band members’ diverse musical interests help to guide the Crooners’ sound.

“It’s a very uncontrived approach — we just start with what feels good and what’s natural to all of us,” he said. “We rely on the fact that it’s never been done before because we haven’t done it before.”

Making an album, as opposed to fighting for the attentions of busy city-dwellers, allows the band to try out some

slower songs, too: the country-tinged sadness of “Love Is A Holiday,” the bluesy “Give A Little Peace To You,” and the road lullaby “Different Names” (which sounds like a lost Grateful Dead track, if Jerry Garcia had grown up in the South instead of San Francisco).

While several band members have already come and gone (even Denton skipped one of their European jaunts and the live album that followed), Merkle said he’s pleased that the original lineup has reunited.

“We have this raw energy and chemistry between the three of us. It’s almost like a rowdy brothers mentality — you and your buddies just kind of rolling around, and you know more about each other than you’re supposed to, and you try not to use it against each other too often. It’s a good time, trying to figure it all out.”

In the meanwhile ... look

out, world: The Crooners also have done street gigs here in the United States (especially New York), and they’d like to take their act to other continents, too — Australia, South America, maybe Asia.

They also wouldn’t be averse to a music-label deal, but Merkle knows their unconventional ideas could make that tricky.

“We want people who would be interested in us where they’d be willing to let us be who we are and do things on our terms, even if it was kind of renegade and vagabond, maybe even illegal to play the way we do. If they want to risk that type of publicity non-stop coming from a band,” he said.

Don’t worry, boys — with an album like “So Many Places” on your resume, some savvy music exec should be willing to take that risk. And soon.